

## December 20, 2005: U.S. should act to prevent return of Hindu refugees to Afghanistan from Germany

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Contact:

Anne Johnson, Director of Communications, (202) 523-3240, ext. 27WASHINGTON - The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) wrote to the U.S. Department of State asking that it urgently communicate with the German government to prevent the imminent involuntary deportation of thousands of particularly vulnerable asylum seekers from Germany to Afghanistan, including Hindu refugees who face the threat of violence upon return to Afghanistan. The imminent deportation of Afghan asylum seekers was announced earlier this month by authorities within the Federal Republic of Germany. The Afghan Hindu population was one of the most severely persecuted groups under the Taliban, and nearly all members of the community fled the country. Because the government in Kabul does not exercise full control over the country, and religious freedom and human rights abuses continue in regions outside of the central government's control, the Commission is concerned that these individuals will be subject to persecution if forced to return to Afghanistan. A Hindu aid worker from India, Maniyappan Raman Kutty, was recently brutally beheaded."In the event that the German government moves ahead with involuntary deportation, the Commission is urging the U.S. Refugee Program to prepare for the resettlement of Afghan Hindus and members of other particularly vulnerable groups in the United States, as was done with Bosnian refugees in the late 1990's when Germany launched their involuntary return at a time when other members of the international community considered it too unsafe to conduct involuntary repatriations to Bosnia," said USCIRF Chair Michael Cromartie. The text of the letter to the State Department follows: Dear Acting Assistant Secretary Greene: I am writing on behalf of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom to urge that the United States communicate and act urgently to prevent the imminent involuntary deportation from Germany to Afghanistan of particularly vulnerable asylum seekers, including Hindu refugees who face the threat of violence upon return to Afghanistan. The imminent deportation of Afghan asylum seekers was announced earlier this month by authorities within the Federal Republic of Germany. We ask that the United States urgently communicate with the Federal Republic of Germany to halt these deportations of vulnerable populations and, in addition, that the United States take steps similar to those it took in the late 1990s to allow applications for resettlement to the United States of Bosnian refugees who had been faced with the similar threat of forcible return and deportation from Germany. As the Commission noted in its 2005 Annual Report, the government in Kabul does not yet exercise full control over the country. Religious freedom and human rights abuses persist in regions that are effectively outside of central government control, as was evidenced recently by the brutal beheading of Hindu aid worker Maniyappan Raman Kutty from India. These substantial security threats present a persistent danger to the establishment of democracy and the rule of law throughout Afghanistan. Religious minorities - such as Hindus and Sikhs - were severely persecuted under the Taliban, and nearly all 50,000 of them fled the country. In official remarks made in Brussels earlier this year at the Strategic Consultations Convening on Refugee and Population Movements to and from Afghanistan, then-Assistant Secretary Dewey said "that there are likely to be a significant number of Afghans for whom voluntary repatriation will not be suitable." Assistant Secretary Dewey expressed that the United States would not like to see Afghan refugees being "put under pressure" to leave the major host countries of Iran and Pakistan. We are now faced, however, with a situation where one of the most persecuted groups under the Taliban - the Afghan Hindu population - is facing forcible return by a third country: Germany. In Hamburg alone there are 12,000 Afghans, hundreds of them Hindus, who are now being threatened with deportation if they do not accept financial assistance to "voluntarily" return to Afghanistan. While the German lander (states) move ahead with plans for imminent deportations, even the German Foreign Ministry reports that the situation for Afghans "continues unimproved countrywide" and that, in some provinces, "a return there is not possible without risk to life and limb." This situation is not unprecedented. In the late 1990's, the German lander launched involuntary returns of Bosnian refugees at a time when other members of the international community considered it too unsafe to conduct involuntary repatriations. At that time, the United States government, after being unsuccessful in its efforts to discourage the Germans from conducting such deportations, established a processing priority for Bosnians in Germany, and saved many of them from deportation by allowing them to apply to the United States for resettlement. We would urge that the United States prevail upon the German government to stop returns of members of religious minorities persecuted under the Taliban. To prepare for the possibility that this suggestion from the United States could go unheeded, we would also urge that the U.S. Refugee Program make preparations for the establishment of a resettlement processing priority for Afghan Hindus and members of other particularly vulnerable groups. This program could be based on the highly successful one established nearly a decade ago to protect Bosnian asylum seekers from premature deportations out of Germany. We look forward to your timely attention to this imminent situation and to your response. Sincerely, Michael Cromartie

Chaircc: Undersecretary of State for Global Affairs Paula Dobriansky

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